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for the extension of knowledge, brotherly love, and heroism are capable of exciting admiration and reverence, so long will the Arctic voyages, and the brave voyagers, be held in grateful remembrance among men. The enterprises of commerce and the plans of humanity have indeed been baffled, but we are glad to feel that the world has not wholly lost the treasure and the precious lives, which have been expended in the SEARCH FOR THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE.

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ART. VI.—*Beaumarchais et son Temps; Études sur la Société en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle d'après des Documents inédits.* Par LOUIS DE LOMÉNIE. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères. 1856. 8vo. 2 vols. pp. xi., 522, 596.

AMONG the characters of a secondary importance which distinguish the most brilliant portion of the last century, there are few possessed of such universal attraction as that which attaches itself to the name of Beaumarchais. To the man of letters, he presents himself as the author of the two wittiest and most sparkling plays that the French stage has seen since the days of Molière. The advocate and the general reader will recall to mind those passages in the *Causes Célèbres* to which his talents have given almost an historical interest. The financier and the merchant recognize in him the man of business, whose transactions reached “from China to Peru,” and who, from the most insignificant beginnings, brought his credit to be respected in every commercial mart in Christendom; while to the politician and the statesman, he figures as the subtle diplomatist, the hardy intriguer, whose machinations involved the whole European continent, more or less, in our Revolutionary contest, and embarked in the cause of a distant and an alien race, struggling to establish a democracy in the place of a constitutional monarchy, the most ancient of the despotic powers of the Old World. And yet, strange to say, the personal history of this man has hitherto remained in greater obscurity than

that of almost any public character of his day and generation. Even those scenes in his career which relate most immediately to American affairs are not yet completely unveiled; and in short, until assisted by the labors of M. de Loménie, the student was rather perplexed and tantalized than materially benefited by his consultation of the scanty and scattered memorials which existed in reference to his public and private life.

In the preparation of the volumes before us, their author appears to have enjoyed singular advantages. His style is agreeable, his information comprehensive and accurate, and the *matériel* placed at his disposal all that could be desired. The opening chapter describes M. de Loménie's admission, under the guidance of his hero's grandson, into the dusty and long-closed garret, where for five-and-fifty years had slumbered in undisturbed repose the vast magazine of papers and documents which Beaumarchais had left behind. Buried beneath the accumulated dust of half a century, hidden in chests or piled away on cobwebbed shelves, whole heaps of invaluable manuscripts met his delighted view. Here was a package of letters from dignitaries long since in the grave; there, files of documents relative to those famous lawsuits with which "all Europe rang from side to side." At the bottom of yonder trunk, whose key has long since been lost and forgotten, he finds the original autographs of the Barber of Seville and the Marriage of Figaro, lying side by side with the model of an escapement, carrying us back to the days of the humble watchmaker in the Rue St. Denys, and inscribed *Caron filius ætatis 21 annorum regulatorem invenit et fecit 1753*. The sight of these *chefs d'œuvre* of the humble mechanic and of the courtly dramatist, so carefully preserved together, reminds one of the Eastern king who was wont to display in the same coffer his original shepherd's robe and his gorgeous mantles of royalty.

From the arrangement and docketing of some of the papers thus discovered, it would seem that Beaumarchais had himself anticipated their future value for biographical purposes. But at his death, his family had good reasons for not giving them to the public. Hence it is that so little has hith-

erto been known, and that little not well, of his career. The sketch by La Harpe, vague as it is, was long the only authentic source of information about him, unless we include the scattered and isolated passages in which he incidentally figures in the memoirs of the times. At last, however, when family policy no longer compels the suppression of any of the voluminous documents that survive their author, it is fortunate indeed that circumstances should have thus happily concurred for the development of a history so intimately interwoven with that of the epoch in which he flourished. Sprung from the lower ranks of society, he has left the traces of his wanderings through every grade. As M. de Loménie himself remarks, the surprising variety of his *aptitudes* brought Beaumarchais into constant contact with the most opposite persons and things, and fitted him to play every day, and nearly at the same moment, the most diverse parts in the comedy of life. Watchmaker; musician and singer; playwright and composer; courtier or demagogue, as occasion dictated; man of pleasure and man of business; financier and manufacturer; editor and privateer; politician, ambassador, and secret agent of the state; turning aside from considering the salary of a *danseuse* to despatch a squadron which should battle with "the hardy Byron," side by side with the fleet of D'Estaing;—Beaumarchais had a hand in almost every affair, great or small, which preceded the French Revolution.

In the shop of a humble watchmaker of Paris, and on the 24th of January, 1732, Pierre Augustin Caron was born. As Arouet possesses all his fame under the territorial appellation of Voltaire, so, a quarter of a century later, the young Caron acquired that more euphonious territorial surname which his genius has made immortal. It is sufficient to say here of his family, that, while in point of position it was respectable among the *bourgeoisie* of Paris, it was far superior, as to mental cultivation, to perhaps any in the same rank of today. In this domestic circle, the relations of Caron appear to have been singularly happy. Loving and beloved, the same tenderness and generosity which embellished his childhood accompanied him to the grave; and his correspondence

with his relatives constitutes by no means the least interesting portion of the volumes before us. Yet the days of his youth passed not altogether smoothly. They were the witnesses of full many an escapade, pushed, perhaps, to the utmost limit of careless gayety; nor did his father always find in the half-spoiled boy the very model of an industrious apprentice. These juvenile disorders at length came to a head; and, as well as his nature permitted, he seems to have in season shaken off the slough of his inconsequential follies, and subsided into the acute and ingenious mechanic. Towards the end of 1753, being then in business with his father, he made his *début* before the public, contending with success for the honor of a certain improvement in his craft, of which a brother watchmaker had sought to deprive him. The affair was ended by his introduction, as watchmaker to the king, into the halls of Versailles. By his professional skill, he now speedily obtained not only the custom of the court, but, what was of far greater value, the notice of the royal family. Once noticed, it was hardly possible for him not to please. His tall and well-proportioned person; his regular and handsome features; and, above all, his active and self-confident mind, could not but inspire the feeling that he was not the man to neglect. At no period of his life, and still less at the age of twenty-four, was Caron likely to be found the victim of excessive modesty. The lines of Hudibras might not unfitly be applied to this part of his character:

“ He that has but impudence,  
To all things has a fair pretence;  
And put among his wants but shame,  
To all the world may make his claim.”

And when we consider his various and wonderful capacity, we need be surprised at none of his victories. Though no flight seemed too lofty or too daring for him to essay, courage never failed him. No Icarus was he, to lose heart midway at the height he had attained, and topple headlong down into the giddy gulf below. When he failed,—and fail he did, on more than one occasion,—the fault was in anything rather than in his own lack of audacity and presence of mind.

Caron had not been long attached to the court of Louis XV., when he contracted an advantageous matrimonial alliance with the widow of M. Francquet, to whose employment in the palace he also succeeded. It was from some portion of this lady's estates that he borrowed his cognomen of Beaumarchais; but it was not until 1761, when he bought the sinecure post of a Royal Secretary, that he acquired nobility, and the legal right to subscribe himself *de* Beaumarchais. This gave occasion for his witty reply, in the *procès Goëzman*, to the reproaches of his plebeian origin. "My nobility is no thing of yesterday," he cried; "it is already *nearly twenty years old!* Nor is it like that of many of our nobles, of uncertain origin, and involved in tradition. I have the parchment deed itself to show for it, freshly written, and stamped with yellow wax. No one can dispute it to me, for here is the receipt!" Such humorous insolence as this is the strongest commentary on the state of feeling in France before the Revolution. But he was not fortunate in wedlock. His first wife died in less than a year from their nuptials. In 1768, he found consolation in the charms of another widow, one Madame Lévêque, a lady endowed largely with what Parson Evans calls "good gifts"; but she also died in about two years. These circumstances gave a handle to the charge of poisoning, which was afterwards whispered against the bereaved husband; but the story does not even call for refutation, it is so palpably groundless. The favor which various accomplishments of the young watchmaker had gained for him with the daughters of the king, was the commencement of his troubles. Envied, yet contemned, by a throng of high-born courtiers, he was exposed to incessant insult and contumely. His ready tongue, and sometimes not less ready hand, were constantly in requisition. Some of his retorts were very happy. Every one knows the story of a gentleman seeking to affront him by publicly calling on him to regulate a superb watch. In vain Beaumarchais protested that from long abstinence he had forgotten the trade of his youth, and had become very awkward. His adversary insisted; and in the next moment, while pretending to lift it to the light, Beaumarchais dropped the jewelled timepiece from his hands,

and it was dashed to pieces. With a low bow, and a reiteration of his awkwardness in such matters, he left the impertinent courtier to gather up the shattered fragments and to digest his discomfiture.

Finding themselves no match for him in wit, these gentry resorted to other means of annoyance; but they were always baffled. Provoked to a duel, he dismissed his antagonist to a world where birth is regarded even less than at the court of Versailles. In all the difficulties in which he was involved by reason of the contrast between his origin and his position, we find the *parvenu* acting with a spirit and a coolness that often amounted to sheer impertinence. If, as a sequence to his fisticuff brawl with the Duc de Chaulnes, he got himself in 1773 into the prison of For-l'Évêque, he was speedily released; for his parts and understanding had won him many admirers, and some powerful friends. He was admitted to a court where no man who could contribute to the royal amusement had need to fear neglect; and so long as the king was gratified, it mattered little who else was annoyed. Madame du Deffand relates a curious instance of this sovereign disregard of the convenience of the rest of the world. One night Madame Victoire was taken with a whim for a certain sort of comfit, peculiar to Orleans. Her royal father at once sent a message to his prime minister, the Duc de Choiseul. The latter, in equal haste, rushed to the Bishop of Orleans, and, at three o'clock in the morning, roused that prelate from his episcopal slumbers, to peruse the following lines:—"Monsieur the Bishop of Orleans: My daughters want some *cotignac*. They want it in very little boxes. If you have none, I pray you"—(here was a pen-and-ink drawing of a sedan-chair, underneath which the letter continued)—"to send at once for some to your cathedral city, and take care that the boxes are not very large. Monsieur the Bishop of Orleans, may God have you in his holy keeping. LOUIS.—*Postscriptum*. The sedan-chair means nothing; my daughters had drawn it on the sheet which I found under my hand." The good Bishop of course sent a courier under whip and spur to Orleans. The *cotignac* arrived at the palace on the next day, but the momentary desire was gone, and nobody wanted it.

This part of the life of Beaumarchais contains many scenes which remind us of the story of the *cotignac*. His musical abilities were of service to the princesses, and there was no end to the laborious commissions with which he was honored. But he knew very well how to turn to good account even the disagreeabilities of his position. His influence with the royal family, though not sufficient at this time for any matter of serious importance, was ample to bring about the gratification of the desires of M. Paris du Verney, a wealthy financier; who did not fail to reciprocate these services by admitting his young ally to a share of his affairs. As wealth began to flow in, we find him still increasing his social standing by the purchase of more of those sinecure posts (happily long ago abolished) which served only to bring rank and dignity to the vendee, money to the vendor, and trouble to the public.

In 1764, he passed into Spain, called thither not less by certain domestic concerns, in which his sister's reputation was involved, than by commercial engagements. Even thus early his attention had evidently been directed towards America. One of his enterprises was to obtain for a company the exclusive commerce of Louisiana: he sought to monopolize the supply of slaves to the Spanish colonies; and by a letter from Madrid, in January, 1765, we find him importing large quantities of breadstuffs from New England. In the intervals of business he abandoned himself to the pursuits of gayety and pleasure; and probably brought back to France, *in alta mente reposta*, the first shadowings of his Figaros, his Almavivas, and his Bartholos. A fruitless love-affair with a beautiful Creole from St. Domingo, where it is not easy to say which party jilted the other, was perhaps the occasion of his directing his attention, not long after his return to Paris, to literature. *Eugénie*, his first play, was produced at the Théâtre Français in June, 1767, with abundant success. This is a sentimental five-act piece, in tone not unlike that of Cumberland and his school. Like "The West-Indian," too, despite the contemporaneous favor which it received, it possesses now very little interest. *Les Deux Amis*, the second fruit of his dramatic Muse, was brought out in January, 1770, and happily condemned; — happily, for otherwise its author, who

singularly enough thought, at this time, of nothing less than comedy, might have been deluded by success into a serious misapprehension of his *forte*, and the world of imagination thus have lost some of its most brilliant inhabitants.

But his next appearance before the public was in a matter which moved a wider mirth than any comedy since the days when Thespis charmed Athens in a cart, and which involved more serious results than any tragedy that was ever witnessed on the mimic stage. In July, 1770, died Paris du Verney, the friend and associate in affairs of Beaumarchais, leaving his nephew, the Comte de la Blache, heir to a fortune of about 1,500,000 francs. Between this young man and Beaumarchais a lawsuit presently occurred, growing out of the settlement of Du Verney's accounts. A large balance was claimed by the heir as due from the defendant to the deceased. To rebut this, Beaumarchais produced an account, dated April 1st, 1770, and signed by Du Verney, which purported to be a full settlement of their common business. This document the plaintiff declared was a forgery. The effect of a plea like this every one will understand. It gives a criminal aspect to a civil suit, and compels the accused to defend not only his purse, but his character. If therefore La Blache sustained his allegations, the reputation of Beaumarchais would be ruined. Already, by the *memoires* or pleadings of the plaintiff and his advocate, it had received the most cruel stabs. The most atrocious calumnies were accumulated in those pages; that the defendant was a public poisoner, was one of the least of his crimes. However, the case being brought to trial, in the spring of 1772, judgment was given in favor of Beaumarchais; and from this decision his opponent appealed to the parliament.

To follow briefly the course of this remarkable affair, we will pass at once over the episode of M. de Chaulnes and the jail of For-l'Évêque, and pause to notice for a moment the complexion of this new court. In December, 1770, M. Maupeou, by a most arbitrary and unconstitutional decree, had abolished the ancient organizations of the parliaments of France, and had ended by dissolving entirely that of Paris, exiling its members, and erecting a new chamber of his own

creatures. This proceeding had naturally produced great excitement. The whole nation at once was in a flame. The eleven provincial parliaments gave vent to the most violent indignation. With a solitary exception, the princes of the blood royal, as well as a numerous body of the peers of France, refused to recognize the existence of the new chamber; and the eloquence of Malesherbes gave expression to the sentiment of the united people. But all was in vain: Maupeou stood firm; and his new parliament was proof against any opposition that had yet been waged against it. It was reserved for a single and a private hand to strike the blow to which a nation was inadequate.

The affair with La Blache had now nearly reached its conclusion in the chamber. A reference had been made to a member named Goëzman, and on his report, it was thought, the case would be decided. This man's wife entered into relations with Beaumarchais, who was anxious to gain favor with his judge, and obtained from him two hundred louis, which she was to return if the decision was against him. Fifteen louis further she exacted, to be paid to her husband's secretary. The day arrived; the determination of the parliament was made known; and it was against Beaumarchais. Madame Goëzman refunded his two hundred louis; but the fifteen, she said, were paid to the secretary, and were beyond her control. Irritated at the loss of his suit, which was almost ruinous to his fortune, and quite so to his character, and ascertaining from the secretary that the fifteen louis had never been given him, Beaumarchais took the dangerous step of demanding their restitution. Should she now repay him, he would be not only by fifteen louis the richer, but he might be able to make some capital out of her conduct; if she denied the whole transaction, he trusted to establish his case, and to impute to the husband a share in his wife's venality; and so in either event to facilitate the reversal of the decree. His policy here was very plain. Convinced that the suit had gone against him simply because La Blache had bid the highest, his first object was to have a new trial. The consequence was, that Madame Goëzman loudly denied the whole transaction, charging Beaumarchais, in his turn, with having sought to

bribe her husband through her hands; and on this charge Goëzman himself formally accused him before the parliament.

Beaumarchais was now in a truly perilous position. The crime alleged against him bore a punishment at the discretion of the court of aught save death, — *omnia citra mortem*; his accuser was one of that very assembly which was to judge him; and the facts in the case were necessarily of a most obscure and questionable complexion. But his spirits rose with his danger. His pleadings were read by all Paris, — we may almost say, by every capital and polite circle in Europe, — and he took care that they should not be read in vain. Voluminous as a blue-book, they are even at this day as exciting as a romance. This man, said the Prince de Conti, must either be paid or *hung*! His antagonists had painted him in the most odious colors. He now not only vindicated his own character, but returned with compound interest all that they had said of him. The public was pleased with his talents, and willingly conceded the truth of the reproaches he cast upon the opposing party, who had commenced the attack. “On riait,” says La Harpe, “de les voir écorchés, parce qu’ils avaient le poignard à la main.”

Unfortunately for himself, however, Beaumarchais was not to be tried before the tribunal of public opinion, but by a court already amply exasperated against him from the very fact that he had become a public favorite. They well knew that the daily exhibitions of popular hatred, though directed for the moment against but one of their fellows, owed their origin in a large measure to a general dislike for the whole body; and so far as their courage would permit, they avenged themselves. Forced to convict the Goëzmans, they involved Beaumarchais in the same category, by what train of logical reasoning it is impossible to perceive; but the three were found guilty together. On the 26th of February, 1774, Beaumarchais was sentenced to degradation from all his civic rights; “la cour te blâme et déclare infame,” were the words of the decree; on the 27th, he was the most popular man in Paris. There was scarce a person of note in the city who did not call upon him; the Prince de Conti and the Duke of Orleans united to give a superb fête in his honor; every man recognized in him the

virtual conqueror of the public foe. For though the Maupeou parliament had indeed stung him to the quick, it had thereby ruined itself; like that of a venomous insect, its sting was left in the wound, and gone for ever. In proclaiming civil death to a man whom court, camp, and *quai* united to honor, it had signed its own death-warrant. A few months later its dissolution was consummated, and its predecessor re-established; but it was not for some time afterward that the obnoxious sentence and judgment were repealed. The only remaining feature of the trial that we will refer to is the curious episode of Clavijo, so agreeably narrated by Mr. Lewes in his late work, and which gave to the illustrious Goethe a subject for one of his earliest dramas.

Pending the remission of his sentence, Beaumarchais did not remain unemployed. The Barber of Seville was written; his second wife was buried, and her place supplied by a third; and Louis XV. had engaged him in a secret mission to London, to purchase the suppression of a scurrilous life of Madame du Barry, the royal mistress. Such was his success in this last affair, that, despite his hatred of that profligate adventuress, Louis XVI., immediately on the death of his grandfather, despatched him on a somewhat similar expedition. It was in these negotiations that Beaumarchais laid the foundations of certain intimacies in London, which he turned to so very excellent account a few months later in regard to the American question. His intervention between the French government and that famous "jack-gentlewoman," (as Peter Pindar calls him,) the Chevalier d'Éon, forms one of not the least curious chapters in his life. These events, however, and much more of a history scarcely less entertaining than that of Gil Blas (to whom, indeed, its hero may be well compared), we must pass over, to come at once to what must be to Americans the most interesting portion of his career. The importance of the French assistance to this country during its Revolutionary war has hardly ever been overrated, and the means by which it was brought about have never been fully developed. "Non pourtant rien est," as we are told by old Froissart, "qui ne soit sceu, ou loing ou pres"; and the volumes before us have done much to illuminate this matter.

Exhausted by the Seven Years' War, disgusted with the peace which concluded it, France could not but regard with the deepest interest the approaches of a struggle which, terminate as it might, must greatly injure her hereditary enemy. But she was in no condition to interfere openly, and to do so secretly required no small degree of tact and dexterity; for sooner or later the fact would be known, and if America were to fail, the revenge of Britain was not likely to spare the covert abetter of civil war. Her approaches therefore were at the outset of the most careful and guarded description. As early as November, 1775, an old French officer was in waiting upon Congress at Philadelphia, assuring them of the good dispositions of the king, his master, but disguising even his own name. "If you want arms," said he, "you shall have them; if you want ammunition, you shall have it; if you want money, you shall have it." But when pressed for his authority, he merely drew his hand across his throat, and informed them that "he should take care of his head"; and so departed as secretly as he came.\* About the same time that this wary negotiator must have been despatched to America, Beaumarchais was sent to London, ostensibly on business connected with the D'Eon affair, to collect Spanish coin for the West Indies, and on other nominal pretexts; but really to watch the current of English and Transatlantic policy. This task he performed with characteristic acuteness and dexterity. Of course, the first thing for him to do was to obtain accurate information of the actual designs of the colonists and of the mother country; and next, to ascertain the power of either party to carry through its plans. His facilities were singularly good; for while on the one hand he was on terms of established and easy intimacy with Lord Rochford, a member of Lord North's cabinet, and the same "gentle youth" whose musical proclivities made him the butt of the satirical scribblers of the day; his relations with Wilkes, on the other hand, brought him into ready communication with the American junto at London. Of such opportunities no one could have made a better use than the political agent of Louis XVI.; and this too seems to

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\* Flanders's Lives and Times of the Chief Justices, p. 152.

have been the opinion of the French ministry, since some of the most important state papers on America that we know of were sent from Beaumarchais with unbroken seals, through the hands of M. de Sartines, to those of the king himself. In September, 1775, we find him painting in the liveliest colors the condition of the political horizon, over which, dark and lowering as it was, there appeared to be gathering clouds yet more dangerous than any England had seen since the days of her Great Rebellion. In fact, to the eye of many political observers, on either side of the Channel, a visionary scaffold terminated the vista. Lord Rochford himself scrupled not to hint that the winter would scarcely pass without seeing seven or eight heads of the leaders of the king's party or of the opposition brought to the block; and M. de Vergennes uneasily doubted, in the probability of an English revolution, as to the personal safety of George III.

It did not long remain undiscerned by the cabinet of Versailles that a terrible struggle was inevitable between England and America. No great degree of foresight was necessary for them to perceive that in such a contest their own nation could not long remain an entirely neutral power. On the one side, they were clamorously beset with applications for aid from America; on the other, they were haughtily admonished by Great Britain to restrain their people from any steps which directly or indirectly might benefit the revolted colonies. But the safety of her sugar islands was an object very dear to France; and willing as she was to see the commerce and prosperity of Britain humbled, she was properly adverse to perilling needlessly her own interests. It was not until she saw her way clear before her, that she involved herself at all in the contest. The representations of Beaumarchais doubtless had great effect in bringing about the final result. Early in his mission he foresaw the coming *imbroglio*, and pointed out to his superiors the advantages, if not the absolute necessity, of an alliance with America. In fact, his views at this juncture seem to have been, in a measure, those of an alarmist. "If England gains the complete victory in America," he wrote in February, 1776, to Louis XVI., "it will be at such a cost of men and money that she will infallibly seize on our sugar

islands to compensate herself ; and she will do this even more certainly, if fortune falls the other way, and she finds herself stripped of her continental plantations." Even if a conciliation should take place, he did not doubt that the ill-feeling of the two contending parties would be turned into one stream against France, and their mutual dislike merged in the hatred of a common foe. To such a conclusion he was perhaps led by the language of Arthur Lee, who, while offering to France for a term of years what was tantamount to a monopoly of American trade, as the price of her assistance, threatened that, should this ultimatum be declined, Congress would readily find some other European court willing to strike the bargain, and that America would not then be long in avenging herself on France. If Lee did really make such a proposal, (and there seems no reason to doubt it,) it is unlikely that Congress would have ratified the scheme. For though he was now the secret agent of that body in London, he was vested with no such plenipotentiary powers ; and so far as foreign states were concerned, his functions appear to have been limited to ascertaining their disposition, and nothing more. This, however, could not have been known to Beaumarchais ; and his interviews with Lee therefore only served to make him more vehement for the active interposition of his own court, which had so far endeavored to preserve a tolerably strict neutrality. Fortunately for us, Britain exacted yet more. In allusion to this, Vergennes, under date of April 26, 1776, remarks, with some bitterness, that England seems to consider his master bound to protect her interests, at the expense of those of France ; and forcibly contrasts the conduct of his own court and of that of St. James during the Corsican rebellion, when aid without stint was poured into that island from England. To a cabinet thus "drifting into a war," the language of Beaumarchais could not have been very unwelcome. But it was some time, despite the supposed promises and threats of Congress presented by Lee, before this language produced any serious effect.

Beaumarchais had met Lee at Wilkes's, near the close of the year 1775, and many free conversations on the subject of American affairs ensued between them. A mutual misappre-

hension appears to have occasionally taken place, — the very natural consequence of an enthusiastic young American and a not less excited young Frenchman comparing together the propriety and feasibility of plans which at best were as yet barely speculative and contingent. Besides, though Lee was a good French scholar, it is not probable that he had then acquired the conversational fluency which is usually gained only by a prolonged residence in France; while Beaumarchais himself understood no English. The one word which he esteemed the root of the language, and which probably stood him in the same stead as Wamba's *pax vobiscum* in *Ivanhoe*, he wittily enough brings forward in the *Marriage of Figaro*; and we prefer this mode of accounting for the incongruous versions of their conferences, as given by the two parties, to charging either of them with wilful mendacity. Beaumarchais may have misunderstood what he reports Lee to have told him respecting the intentions of Congress. Lee was certainly wrong in his statement of December 13th, 1775, to the Secret Committee, that Vergennes had sent a gentleman (Beaumarchais) to him, "who informed him that the French court could not think of entering into a war with England; but that they would assist America by sending from Holland that fall £ 200,000 worth of arms and ammunition to St. Eustatius, Martinique, or Cape François; that application was to be made to the governors or commandants of those places, by inquiring for *Monsieur Hortalez*, and that, on persons properly authorized applying, the above articles would be delivered to them." This transaction explains itself to us as the first sketch of the scheme which was afterwards in a modified form carried into effect, but which at the time we refer to was rejected by the French ministry. During the summer of 1776, however, various plans were probably revolved in the cabinet, all tending to the adoption of some means whereby supplies might be secretly transmitted to America, actually by the government, but apparently by some private and irresponsible individual. And throughout, the ideas and influence of Beaumarchais had altogether the controlling weight with Vergennes. It is certainly to him that we owe the first material assistance obtained from Europe. On June 10th, 1776, he received

the sum of 1,000,000 francs from M. de Vergennes, to whom account therefor was to be rendered; and on August 11th, a like sum from the court of Spain, to be in like manner accounted for to Vergennes. The transaction bears on its face no direction as to the application of these moneys; but M. de Loménie explains it as follows. The fund was for the ultimate benefit of America; but, for prudential reasons, the operation was to assume, not only to English but to American eyes, the appearance of a commercial speculation of essentially private origin, with which the government had no connection. With the capital thus furnished him, Beaumarchais was to found such an establishment as should supply America with all needful articles of war, which he was permitted to purchase secretly from the royal arsenals, at fair rates. Reimbursement was to be obtained by him in American produce, for the introduction of which into France every facility was furnished him. The business, once started, was to sustain itself; government reserving a discretion, founded on inspection of the accounts to be given it by Beaumarchais, as to the necessity of yielding him thereafter any more solid encouragement.

This, it must be observed, is merely M. de Loménie's conclusion; he gives no positive proof that such a convention was actually made. Its existence was always denied by Lee, who assured Congress that the supplies sent by *Roderigue Hortalez & Co.* (for this was the fictitious style under which Beaumarchais conducted his business) were gratuities from the French government; and that, according to their agent, Beaumarchais, as a cover only, and not as a payment, a small quantity of American produce was to be remitted, to give it the air of a commercial transaction. We incline to believe that Lee was more or less mistaken here. The character of this patriotic and talented, but arrogant and ambitious man, has been so well drawn by Mr. Sparks, that we need not repeat his verdict. His imprudent suspicions and ill-founded jealousies often led him into reflections which neither contemporaneous judgment nor that of posterity can sustain. Such was his distrust of Franklin, for instance. It does more credit, however, to Lee's heart than to his head, that, after having in his

official capacity for years treated Beaumarchais as a dishonest man, and stigmatized him as an adventurer, he should be found declaring, in July, 1779, that "he absolutely does not know whether Beaumarchais is right or wrong, and while it is doubtful, one would not impeach his character!" The fact seems to us to be, that, in the outset, Lee was prodigiously and virtuously gratified at the idea of aiding to render to his country such an important service as the procuring of French subsidies. At this time, he was the only European representative, in any form, of Congress; and as such, he was treated with. When Mr. Deane came to Paris, in July, 1776, clothed with a precise authority, Beaumarchais of course transferred his negotiations to that person. Lee, finding himself thus thrown out, came at once to Paris, quarrelled with both of them, and went back in a rage to London. Hence arose a hatred, which, we fear, led him unwittingly to commit more than one injustice, at the moment, perhaps, when, blinded by prejudice, he thought he was acting most patriotically. For Deane was not a whit less ambitious than Lee.\* Each desired that his country should be served, and well served, but neither wished to see it served, in this regard, by any other than himself. With

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\* The history of Deane's recall from France, and his disgrace at home, his failure to render satisfactory accounts to Congress, and his subsequent improper conduct in abandoning America, are well known. But we cannot resist quoting here the most valuable exposition of his character that we have met, and which may not be familiar to many of our readers. It is the judgment of the late Colonel John Trumbull, — a man in every way competent to decide. "Ambition, not avarice, was his ruling passion. In his early transactions at the court of France, as the political and commercial agent of Congress, he rendered important services to his country, but by exceeding his powers, he made his recall necessary. Exasperated at the cool reception he met with on his return, and at the delay in settling his accounts, he became engaged in a contest with many of the most influential members of Congress. Defeated in many of his purposes, he repaired again to France. He found his political influence lost, with the loss of his official character. The publication of a number of his letters, written during his residence in France, and charging the French Court with intrigue and duplicity in their negotiations with us, rendered him obnoxious, and drove him into voluntary exile in the Netherlands, dissatisfied, exasperated, and impoverished almost to penury. Thus forced into an unnatural and friendless residence in foreign countries, he gave himself up to rage, resentment, and actual despair, and vented his passions in execrations against France, America, and mankind. . . . He considered himself as a man, not only abused and ill-requited for important services, but denied those pecuniary rewards which had been promised him for his agency in Europe." — *Memoirs of Elkanah Watson*, pp. 131, 132.

all his faults of character, Lee was an honest man; which Deane was not. Lee's fate was therefore far more happy. When Deane fell, who had engaged heartily in the plans of Beaumarchais, the suspicion with which Lee had regarded their connection had a great effect in embarrassing the Frenchman's fortunes. Congress, having been warned that the two were in a plot to cheat America by making her responsible to Hortalez & Co. for stores sent by Louis XVI. as a free gift, naturally took alarm. The return cargos from America soon came irregularly, and then not at all. In the mean time, having appropriated and enjoyed the benefit of these remittances, it was necessary for our government to know whether they were to be paid for or not; in other words, who really sent them, the king or Beaumarchais. Vergennes assured the commissioners, that his master had furnished no part of the shipments made by Hortalez & Co., but had merely suffered a portion of them to be purchased by Beaumarchais from the royal arsenals. This ought to have settled the question; but it is probable some inkling of the fact that the money to buy them came from the treasury had reached the Americans, and they still persevered. What equitable difference this would make in the case, we cannot perceive. Louis had a right to do what he pleased with his own; and if he chose to lend it to a subject to go into business with, that circumstance could not exonerate the subject's debtors. There is no earthly reason to assert that the advances made by Beaumarchais (confessedly, as now appears, by the king's aid) were ever designed by the king to go to America as a free gift. He may have wished, while helping Congress, to help also one of his own subjects; and this seems to us as probable a theory as any other. But to cut a long story short, we will merely state, that, after years and years of contention, the heirs of Beaumarchais were compelled, in 1835, to compromise his claim for a sum infinitely less than they thought was due to him, and hardly more than a third of the balance reported in his favor by Alexander Hamilton, so long ago as 1793. It seems to us, therefore, that he had abundant cause to complain of the lack of good treatment at the hands of the United States.

But despite his Transatlantic misfortunes, he was yet a prosperous man. He was constantly engaged in the most extensive transactions and the most audacious speculations. His publication of two complete editions of Voltaire, — one in seventy volumes octavo, the other in ninety-two volumes duodecimo, — would alone serve to show the adventurous character of his mind. This was by far the heaviest and most dangerous publishing enterprise that had ever been essayed, and his losses by it were enormous. His books, from October 1st, 1776, to September 30th, 1783, are interesting, as presenting some idea of the nature and extent of his dealings through our Revolutionary war. Without entering into details, it will be sufficient for us to mention here, that, against a debtor's side of 21,044,191 livres, they give a credit sheet of but 21,092,515 livres; a profit, on such enormous expenditures, of scarcely ten thousand dollars in seven years.

But while he was expending a fortune in tribute to the literary fame of Voltaire, it must not be thought that he was unmindful of his own. In 1781, he had written and presented for publication his most renowned play, the *Marriage of Figaro*. Accepted by the theatre, it had passed to the proper authorities to be licensed for publication. The sparkling but audacious wit of this piece renders its attractions inexhaustible, even at this day; we may therefore judge of the sensation it produced among the excited circles of Paris, on the eve, almost, of the Revolution of 1789. Even they whose privileged follies and social immunities were most keenly lashed in its pages, ignored its satire for the sake of its wit; sporting as it were among the flowers that garnished the very verge of the precipice, and reckless of the gulf below. The whispers of applause from those who had seen the author's manuscript penetrated the palace, and the king himself expressed a desire to examine the production whose political tendencies were as strongly condemned by one part of his court, as its vivacity and wit were praised by the other. Madame Campan describes to us the occasion when the gentle and amiable Louis XVI., alone with Marie Antoinette, perused for the first time those stinging attacks upon courts

and courtiers, *lettres de cachet*, seigneurial rights, the censorship of the press, and all the thousand-and-one parasites which clung to the old walls of feudalism, and which were already shaking in the first breathings of the revolutionary storm. It was impossible for him not to perceive the effect its representation might produce upon a Parisian audience. "This is detestable," he cried, at the famous monologue in the fifth act, — "this is detestable; it shall never be played. The Bastille must be no more if such a piece as this is to have no fatal consequences. This fellow mocks at everything which a government ought to cause to be respected." "And then it is not to be performed?" inquired the queen, with a slight air of disappointment. "Most decidedly not," replied the king; "of that you may rest assured." In fact, it was not until March, 1784, that Beaumarchais, constantly intriguing to obtain his end, leaving no stone unturned to bring popular opinion to bear upon his case, and to stamp the royal refusal with the stigma of tyranny and arbitrary oppression, succeeded by mere dint of outside pressure in teasing an extorted consent from the reluctant monarch. By this time, all Paris had become aware of the nature of the play; and the occasion of its first representation was welcomed with a clamorous enthusiasm unprecedented even in that excitable city. From early day, crowds beset the theatre doors. Ladies of the first quality had their dinner in the green-room, to secure their places. In the throng, says Bachaumont, *cordons bleus* were elbowed by the Savoyards; the guard was dispersed, the doors broken down, and the railings gave way before the mob. Three persons were suffocated in the press, says La Harpe; "which was one more," as he adds, rather maliciously, "than died for Scuderi." On the stage, the most brilliant display of dramatic ability that France could produce, lending every power to give the piece success, — in the house, an audience alternately enraptured with his wit and electrified by his audacity, — all united to render this, perhaps, the crowning night of the author's life. Sixty-eight performances, almost consecutive, did not exhaust the popular enthusiasm; the receipts on the last being scarcely less than those on the first night. But intimately as the history of the *Folle Journée*

was already blended with that of the approaching revolution, the chapter is not yet concluded. Like all men, Beaumarchais had his rivals and his enemies; and of these not the least bitter was the dwarfish but venomous Suard, who had from the first been opposed to the licensing of the play. With the pestilent warfare of anonymous criticism, he so drove the author to desperation, that at last, weary of a guerilla contest in which, write as wittily as he would, his antagonist was shielded from the world's bitter laugh by his disguise, and yet certain of the identity of his assailant, he discharged a Parthian dart, while avowing his intention to notice no more irresponsible and unvouched assaults. "Shall I," he said, "who, to bring my piece upon the stage, have vanquished lions and tigers, — shall I now degrade myself to the level of a Dutch chambermaid, searching the blankets every morning for some *vile insect of the night*?" The stab was cruelly severe, and the antithesis was happy; for Suard, with whom alone Beaumarchais thought he had to do, was keenly sensitive about his physical insignificance. But unfortunately for the success of the repartee, its author did not know that the bulky Count de Provence (afterwards, as Thackeray irreverently styles him, "that unwieldy monarch, Louis XVIII.") had occasionally taken a secret share in Suard's outpourings of sarcasm and malignity. It was easy to persuade the prince that the satire was aimed at himself; but, mortified as he was at the unlooked-for retort his critical progeny had provoked, he was too sagacious to avow his part in Suard's handiwork. Sinking, therefore, all allusion to the "insect of the night," he took an opportunity to point out to his brother that by lions and tigers the insolent demagogue referred to nothing less than the king and queen; animals to which those amiable and unfortunate personages were never perhaps before or since accused of bearing a resemblance. Already provoked against the writer of the *Marriage of Figaro*, Louis gave vent to his irritation in a manner not unprecedented, but very unwise and very unjust. Without rising from the table, where he appears to have been engaged in some social amusement, he wrote with a pencil on a playing-card an order for the poet's instant confinement in the

prison of St. Lazarus. This was at that time a sort of house of correction; a jail peculiarly for the benefit of young profligates whose debaucheries were not such as to render it desirable to send them to the galleys, yet were too gross to be winked at by the law. To put a grave merchant of fifty-three in the same category with the loosest young men of the town was a thing, to say the least, very unexpected. In fact, we are told that, on the morning of the 9th of March, 1785, when people learned that Beaumarchais, in the very height of his prosperity, had on the night previous been cast, without any cause assigned, into St. Lazarus, the ludicrousness of his position overcame all other considerations, and a universal titter spread through the town. But presently the public, as well as himself, began to be inquisitive about his offence, and to ask questions that could not well be answered. The government, ashamed to say that it was because he was suspected of insinuating a likeness between the king of Frenchmen and the king of beasts, was disturbed by the murmurs that arose on every side. No man in Paris, it was said, can now know in the morning whether he shall not sleep within the walls of a prison. The king was soon as anxious to get Beaumarchais out, as he had been to get him in; but he, probably receiving an inkling of the truth, positively refused to go till the charge against him was declared. The natural good sense and kindly feelings of Louis XVI., however, brought him to reflection, and Beaumarchais was dismissed with every possible compensation to his wounded pride for his five days of captivity.

But his imprisonment seems to have been the turning point in his history. Despite of ministerial regret and popular sympathy, the prestige of his name was gone. His social position was found to be no longer impregnable. Ere long, he was involved in a stock operation with certain bankers in Paris. While he was an extensive holder, they had speculated largely on the prospect of a fall. To depreciate the stock, they engaged the pen of the young and (save for the wildest excesses) almost unknown Mirabeau. As penniless as unprincipled, but in the full vigor of his wonderful genius, Mirabeau leaped into the arena like a practised gladiator.

Never exceeded in powers of invective and contumely, by fair blows and by foul, he so terribly battered the reputation of Beaumarchais as to leave it very unpleasantly affected in the public esteem. The most that the victim could do was to liken his enemy to Demosthenes, and to compare the philippics of the one with the *mirabelles* of the other. Less capable, but not less scurrilous and virulent, was a certain M. Bergasse, an advocate shortly after employed to conduct a trumped up lawsuit against Beaumarchais; and though in deciding for the defendant the court punished the advocate exemplarily for his calumnies, the injurious effects of so much public defamation were irreparable. The operatic spectacle of *Tarare*, which he brought upon the stage in 1787, though it had more success than it deserved, could not have tended to increase his fame. It was received, as we are told, (and can readily believe,) with more surprise than admiration. But he was still wealthy; still full of the same old gayety of heart and audacity of spirit that characterized his earlier days. Past troubles were to him things past; he never suffered them to overcloud the present; while in the future he could see nothing to fear. If the sea were calm and bright, it was well; but if the waves ran wild and high, and the heavens frowned, his disposition was such as to find a fierce pleasure in the turmoil of the elements, and to triumph in mastering the storm. His philosophy was, to a certain extent, that of Rochefoucault: "Il vaut mieux employer notre esprit à supporter les infortunes qui nous arrivent, qu'à prévoir celles qui nous peuvent arriver." In 1789, he was absorbed in the erection of a mansion, sumptuous even beyond the measure of that superb city of which it was to be one of the local wonders. The various political disorders that so soon ensued kept his pen idle till 1791, when he produced *La Mère Coupable*, a meritorious drama, in which he manages, by the way, to settle accounts with his enemy Bergasse. In the following year, he undertook the purchase, in Holland, of a quantity of fire-arms for the French government. The results of this affair were disastrous. He fell into suspicion; his house was searched by the mob, and he himself cast into the Abbaye, whence he was released but two days before the

massacres of September; and finally, having again passed into Holland on the interminable business of the sixty thousand muskets, he was accused of secret correspondence with Louis XVI., and his property was attached by the Convention. A year later—in March, 1793—he hazarded a return to Paris to vindicate himself, and once more was sent back for the muskets, while the Convention retained possession of his effects. During this mission, his name was placed on the list of *émigrés*; his family at Paris were arrested and imprisoned; and he himself was left friendless and destitute at Hamburg. It was not till July, 1796, that, by favor of the newly appointed Directory, he obtained permission to return to Paris. He was now an old man, and his affairs were in a state of the utmost dilapidation and confusion; but his spirit was still unbroken and *rampant*. The brief remainder of his days was spent in the fulfilment of his social duties; the reconstruction of his shattered fortunes; and a constant intermeddling, *pro more suo*, in national politics. His life ebbed away, so far as we learn, with but little pain. At length, on the morning of the 18th of May, 1799, having retired, on the evening previous, from a singularly cheerful party of friends in his own house, he was found dead in his bed. A stroke of apoplexy had surprised him, and he probably passed away, almost unconsciously, at the age of sixty-seven years and three months.

The history of the life of Beaumarchais is one of the most dramatic that biography exhibits; and the events on which it hinges are of large historical importance. The volumes we have here noticed cannot fail to gratify the fancy of every intelligent reader; if they are not found as instructive as entertaining, the fault must be his own.